

THE NATION
8 November 1970

Dr. M. J. Matthews, Herbert
SOCIAL Revolution
in Cuba.
Coign under Matthews

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Truth and Consequences in Political Journalism

REVOLUTION IN CUBA. By Herbert L. Matthews. Charles Scribner's Sons. 468 pp. \$15.

ALVAH BESSIE

In *A World in Revolution* (Scribner's, 1971), Herbert Matthews wrote: "I have been the principal journalistic scapegoat for the rise to power of Fidel Castro and for the success of the Cuban Revolution. Owen Lattimore was assigned a similar role in the case of the Chinese Revolution in 1949. . . ." The U.S. Senate Internal Security Committee, while never calling Matthews to testify, during its hearings on Cuba "went on to pin the responsibility for Castro and the Cuban Revolution on me and *The [New York] Times* . . ." Matthews continued.

Certainly Matthews is one of the most distinguished foreign correspondents any American newspaper has fielded in our century. But the fact that Matthews covered Italy and its war against Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, India, England, the Italian campaign in World War II and Cuba is not the major reason for the easily applied (and rarely merited) adjective. What distinguished him over the forty-five years he worked for *The New York Times* (twenty-seven as foreign correspondent, eighteen on its editorial board), was his passion for the facts, his refusal to give credence to handouts, his insistence on covering wars from the front lines, his risking of his life and reputation to get significant news, and his conviction that "to expound things as they really happened is the sole purpose" of journalism.

That conviction cost Matthews dear, for not only were he and his newspaper attacked for his exposition of "things as they really happened," but Matthews was also made to suffer by his employer, who did not seem to enjoy the truth about the Spanish Civil War or the Cuban Revolution.

Conflict over Matthews and with Matthews has made journalistic history. In the cases of Spain and Cuba the *Times* was attacked for what its correspondent was reporting, and in turn put pressure on its correspondent by censoring his

copy after reprimanding him for writing "propaganda," or killing it outright. The *Times's* editors were annoyed because Matthews reported that there were Italian Blackshirts fighting for Franco, when one of their other correspondents, William P. Carney, said there were none. Matthews replied by sending detailed accounts and photographs of the Italian troops routed at the battle of Guadajajara (Brihuega) in March of 1937—their equipment, documents, uniforms, battle orders, diaries and even their conversations with him (in Italian). He ended this dispatch with the words, ". . . they were Italians and nothing but Italians." And since the *Times* always called Franco's men "Insurgents," the assertion came out: ". . . they were Insurgents and nothing but Insurgents."

So far as Cuba was concerned, Matthews was in a unique position. When everybody including the dictator Fulgencio Batista thought and announced that Fidel Castro and his handful of guerrillas had been wiped out in the Sierra Maestra, Matthews coolly up and went there, found Castro, and sent out a sensational interview that scooped the world. Matthews's admiration for Castro, Che Guevara and their associates was of course reflected in his dispatches; but that alone could not account for the fact that the *Times* muzzled him continuously.

Why didn't the *Times* fire him instead of rejecting many articles and refusing to print anything he wrote between 1963 and 1966? It even prevented him from getting the biggest story of them all—the missile crisis of 1962. He still had access to the top Cuban leaders because they knew he told the truth about them even if he did not agree with their ideas or their actions. But as a result of its policy—at once spineless and biased—the *Times* got no news at all out of Cuba between 1963 and 1971.

Matthews himself may have provided the reason for the *Times's* ambivalence toward its best foreign correspondent in making it clear in *A World in Revolution*, in two books about Cuba and a biography of Castro, and also in this latest book about Cuba, that he was opposed to communism in Cuba (as in Spain), but he was in favor of a radical social revolution in both countries. In other words he was and is that increasingly liberal that even though

he hurts to this day over the treatment he received from the *Times* for his Spanish and Cuban coverage, he can still "understand" the *Times's* position and almost sympathize with it.

Matthews's new book is the product of enormous labor, and is a deeply researched, detailed and lived history of Cuba. It spans that history from the time of the Spanish-American War which made Cuba our colony in all but name, down to the headlines about the catastrophic U.S.-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and today's headlines about the CIA's continued attempts to assassinate Castro.

Matthews calls his beautifully structured book "An Essay in Understanding." This will not, of course, protect him from the hatred and contempt of those who simply cannot stand having a Communist country "only 90 miles from Florida." But even the most prejudiced will be unable to counter the evidence Matthews has marshaled that what *los barbudos* have done under the leadership of Castro and Guevara has been for the benefit of the vast majority of the Cuban people. Matthews is as adept at re-creating the personalities and histories of Fidel and Che as he is at explaining the circumstances that made the revolution inevitable, the manner in which it was led, the defeats and triumphs experienced, and the reasons for both. The portrait and analysis of Che, ending with his death in Bolivia, in which the CIA played a notorious part, is a high point in this engrossing story.

The reader is led from the historical background of the revolution, the endless exploitation of the Cuban people by Spain—and the United States which "liberated" them in 1898—to the failure of the *Granma* expedition in 1956 that forced a small band of revolutionaries to withdraw into the Sierra Maestra Mountains. From that stronghold they fought and propagandized their way into Havana in January 1959, winning decisive battles against the Batista army of 10,000 men with as few as 300 guerrilla fighters. Matthews continues:

"It is true," Castro told Lee Lockwood [author of *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel*], "that we had many more ready to join us, but they had no weapons."

We captured 500 and some weapons. We showed us, now with 800 armed men, to spread out through-

Alvah Bessie is a screen writer and critic who has also published four novels, three nonfiction narratives, and essays.